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LORD BRYCE ON DEMOCRACY

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LONGFELLOW'S "Morituri Salutamus" needs revising. To its enumeration of the great achievements of veterans there should be made a noteworthy addition. Amply the peer of those illustrious exemplars,—Sophocles, Cato, Theophrastus, Simonides, Chaucer, Goethe,—must be accounted the more than octogenarian author of this *magnum opus*. For if, as Glorious Christopher assured us, Age is the season of imagination, it may have been really a less arduous task to produce "Œdipus Coloneus or Greek Ode" than a much more voluminous work which is the creature not of imagination but of the genius of tireless research, industry, and discretion in marshalling its results.

There are but painfully few of us who can personally recall the delight with which the world welcomed a history of *The Holy Roman Empire*, by a young lawyer named James Bryce, who through that one work stepped into lasting fame. With all the spirit of youth, it had the ripe reflection of mature age; with all the accuracy of an annalist, it had the vivid interest of romance. Thereafter for a quarter of a century we spoke of Bryce as the author of *The Holy Roman Empire* just as we spoke of Gibbon as the author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* or of Motley as the author of *The Dutch Republic*. (For comparisons are by no means always either odious or odorous.) Then in ripe middle age, though that was a generation ago, there came a greater delight and a greater wonder in a work by a Briton which revealed America to Americans better than they had ever seen it for themselves. The work to-day before us is gracefully dedicated to President Lowell, of Harvard, "to whom," says Lord Bryce, "Englishmen are indebted for an admirably lucid and exact description of their government in its theory and practice." With the change of a single word, that amply-deserved tribute

might with at least equal fitness have been paid thirty years ago to the master-mind who then gave us the work which was thereafter to be the classic source from which succeeding generations of American students should derive authentic knowledge of their own country and its political institutions. So thereafter we spoke of him as the author of *The American Commonwealth*.

Now he is well past the fourscore years whose strength Moses declared to be labor and sorrow. (It occurs to me that if it was really Moses, and not "another man of the same name," as we used to say of Homer, who wrote that matchless Psalm, he somewhat belied his own estimate by himself surpassing that limit of age by fifty per cent and still so far escaped labor and sorrow as to keep his eye undimmed and his natural force unabated.) Yet his vision of the world is even more keen and far more comprehensive, his presentation is if possible more forceful, his wit more nimble, and his judgment more resolute and inerrant, than in what we esteemed the golden time of fifty years ago. If hereafter we shall speak of him as the author of *Modern Democracies*, it will be not in forgetfulness of those earlier achievements, either of which would have assured him enduring fame, but simply because in the presence of the superlative mention of the positive and comparative, however opulent in worth they were, becomes superfluous.

It is not at all surprising, indeed, that his scope of vision should now be far more extended and its keenness more penetrating than in those former works. This present essay is in effect a study of the world, and of the world he has for these many years been a most versatile citizen. The *Holy Roman Empire* and *The American Commonwealth* may be regarded as marking historical antipodes. But the expanses between them and around them were not left empty. They were occupied with essays on the flowers and also on the rocks of the Scottish Isles, and on mountain climbing on the heights of Ararat; with discussions of trademarks, and of citizenship; with studies in jurisprudence, and in contemporary biography; with observations and impressions in South Africa, and in South America. Why should he not, then, from the fulness of his survey and the catholicity of his interest, write on any and every theme of interest to mankind? There is none

who can more worthily repeat the ancient profession in *Heautontimorumenos* and declare that because he is a man, nothing can be foreign to him that concerns humanity.

Mankind is indeed the theme of the present work. I have called it a study of the world; but it is of the world of men, rather than of matter. It is ostensibly and technically a study of modern democracies, chiefly as exhibited in the history and organization of half a dozen typical twentieth century republics. As such, it is of encyclopedic value. Lord Bryce has done for France, Switzerland, Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand what he did a generation ago for the United States alone. He describes in analytic detail the forms of government of those countries, the methods of administering them, and their merits and demerits. Had *Modern Democracies* not extended beyond such exposition, for that end alone, it would still have been a memorable production.

But it is immeasurably more than that. The author has the spirit of a philosopher as well as of a narrative and descriptive writer. So, by means of that implication which in the hand of a master is often more convincing than direct statement, he makes it clear that governmental forms and ways and means are, after all, of less consequence than the character and spirit of the people. The same forms which exist now, existed centuries and tens of centuries ago, marked with the same merits and demerits, advocated for the same reasons, denounced for the same causes. He aptly recalls the remark of one statesman to another, that "the saddest memories of political life are of moments at which one had to stand by when golden opportunities were being lost, to see the wrong thing done when it would have been easy to do the right thing." That was said by a Persian to a Greek on the eve of Plataea, just twenty-four centuries ago. In all those ages the world has seen great changes, and we must believe that it has made great progress in the art of Government. Yet we are not sure that those words were ever more pertinent and more poignant in their truth than they are at the present moment.

Lord Bryce addressed himself to this gigantic task in a protean spirit. First of all, he had to be an investigator. Not one who began with a preconceived and immovable notion, and sought for

proofs to substantiate it. Rather was he one with a mental *tabula rasa*, asking "with jesting Pilate"—if he was jesting and not ineffably sad—What is truth? Next he must be a recorder, to set down in orderly fashion, with painstaking accuracy and multitudinous detail, the facts which he had ascertained. And this he did with never-failing lucidity and with something of that charm which was attributed to his former colleague, William Ewart Gladstone, when it was said that he could make the statistics in a Budget speech as fascinating as a romance. Then, finally, he is an unsurpassed explicator, telling us not only the results of his researches but also in the most illuminating and convincing manner why these things are so, and what they mean.

There he halts. The case rests. He has presided over the grand inquest into the status of democracy. He has marshalled all the testimony and all the facts, pro and contra. He has elucidated the meaning of every fact, interpreted all the legal points involved, summed up for both sides, and charged the jury. But he renders no verdict and pronounces no sentence. Whatever may have been in his mind, and whatever those who know him well may read between the lines, he does not say in specific terms what the less thoughtful would have had him say, whether Democracy is a success or a failure, or which of all its varied forms is most auspicious and authentic.

At this, indeed, my own first thought was one half of surprise, half of regret, that he did not take that final step. But that was a thought in haste, before the larger logic of the grand argument appeared. For, as I have said, this work, with all its multitudinous technical details, is in the last analysis no mere review of the twentieth century democracies, but a study of man in his relation to the art and the philosophy of Government; and a demonstration of the familiar proposition of Sir William Jones, that "Men, high-minded men. . . . These constitute a State." The quality of Democracy varies, in times, in places, and among races; but that quality depends upon and is determined by the Demos far more than by the Kratia.

It is thus of the utmost propriety, the very culmination of the author's triumphant logic, to leave the conclusion of the whole matter to the judgment of the Demos. It is not for one to play

the autocrat, and to tell the democracies of the world whether they have succeeded or have failed, for that would be impugment and denial of Democracy itself. The essence of Democracy requires that trial and judgment shall be by peers, and that therefore democracies shall be tried and judged by Democracy. It was for the author merely to reveal them to themselves, and then to leave them to the judgment of themselves.

I have referred, however, to reading between the lines. Of Lord Bryce's own convictions there can be no doubt. As Viscount amid the austere reserve of the Gilded Chamber he is no less a Liberal than when more than forty years ago he was Member for the radical Tower Hamlets. Nor is there doubt as to the overwhelming preponderance of indication in this unrivalled expository of the character, the methods and the conditions of the representative democracies of the world to-day. James Madison once said, in I know not what cynical, pessimistic or other unworthy and unprofitable frame of mind, that if every Athenian citizen were a Socrates, still every Athenian assembly would be a mob. Had that been true, Democracy would have been doomed from the beginning. Against that strange, false dictum these two noble volumes present an impressive protest. Athenian assemblies were not mobs, any more than, twenty centuries later, were their natural successors, the town meetings of New England; nor has the collective judgment of democracies usually or often approximated the mob-like standard.

Nor is that true in the direction of domestic affairs alone. In such matters we should naturally expect the people to realize their wants more justly than segregated sovereigns could, and to adopt the best means of supplying them. In the direction of foreign affairs, on the contrary, it would be pardonable to imagine that the judgment of the expert few might be preferable. Yet Lord Bryce points out more than one or two instances of commanding significance in which the popular view of international affairs and of foreign policies was wiser and truer than that of the chiefs of State; instances to which we should not have to go far afield in time or space to make a supremely notable addition.

The competence of democracies is an ancient thing; or at least faith in it is old, perhaps as old as human government itself. We

think of Plato as an early pioneer in Democracy, but the thing was old before Plato was born. A hundred years before his time, Otanes, in what must have seemed a world-crisis, was declaring that "A popular government bears the fairest name of all, equality of rights. The magistrate obtains his office by lot, and exercises it under responsibility, and refers all plans to the public. I therefore give my opinion that we should do away with monarchy and exalt the people, for in the many all things are found." In twenty-four and a half centuries we have not outgrown that notion. Nor have we, alas! entirely got away from the reproach which Megabyzus cast upon Democracy, when he retorted:

Nothing is more foolish and insolent than a useless crowd; therefore it is on no account to be endured that men who are endeavoring to avoid the insolence of a tyrant should fall under the insolence of an unrestrained multitude. The former, when he does anything, does it knowingly, but the latter have not the means of knowing. For how should they know who have neither been taught nor are acquainted with anything good or fitting?

There was the prototype of the autocrats and "bosses" of to-day, who decry the competence of Democracy while they use it as their tool; the prototype, too, of those of whom it is related that they formally resolved: "First, that the saints shall inherit the earth; and second, that we are the saints." For with the supreme naïveté of the ages, Megabyzus added, after his diatribe against Democracy: "Let us, having chosen an association of the best men, commit the sovereign power to them; *for among them we ourselves shall be included!*"

Truly, it is not far from the *Thalia* of Herodotus to the *Modern Democracies* of Lord Bryce, with Plato and Rousseau and Jefferson and Tocqueville and an innumerable company dotting the space between. The attempt to identify Democracy with Ochlocracy is as old as Aristotle, while the faith that the voice of the people is the voice of God was ancient before Alcuin made of it an epigram. While therefore modern democracies are the most convenient and the most profitable for our studying, we must remember that Democracy itself is no modern thing, but is as old as the Demos itself. What impresses itself upon us with increasing clearness is the great fact eloquently expressed by our author's colleague Lord Morley—like himself, essentially Democrat and

only incidentally Peer—to the effect that not only the well-being of the many but also the chances of exceptional greatness, moral or intellectual, in the gifted few, are highest in a community where the average interest, curiosity, capacity, are all highest.

It is an outworn fallacy, discredited a thousand times by the annals of the nations, that Democracy is incompatible with intellectual preëminence, even with the supreme refinements of artistic culture and creative genius. The fact that Athens was a republic and Sparta was a kingdom is memorable and significant for all time. So while, as I have said, Democracy has been contemporary with humanity, it has been the rule of the ages, in spite of wanderings, fluctuations and exceptions, that Democracy has waxed with human progress and has waned with its retrogression. Then as the average of human culture is growing higher, Democracy is being confirmed. Let me employ an *argumentum ad patriam*. A generation ago, in considering the condition and prospects of the United States, Lord Bryce observed that many of the evils which Tocqueville had perceived two generations before, and had regarded as inherent and incurable, had all but vanished. To-day he testifies that there has been further great improvement since he first surveyed us and wrote his *American Commonwealth*. “I am astonished,” he says, “at the change, and welcome it as auguring well for future progress.”

It is in its reminder and indeed its detailed and convincing demonstration of this inseparable association of Democracy with human welfare that Lord Bryce's great work has its chief, its most vital and its most precious significance. It is in that, too, that all the protagonists of Democracy are most efficient, whether their voices are crying in the wilderness or in the marketplace. Doubtless the future of Democracy, as of civilization and of humanity, is veiled in uncertainty. But whatever happens, as our author declares in one of the most pregnant and inspiring passages that ever came from his pen, Popular Government will take its color from and will flourish or decline according to the moral and intellectual progress of mankind as a whole. For Democracy is based upon the expectation, or the assumption, of certain virtues in the people, and on its tendency to foster and to develop those virtues. “It assumes not merely intelligence, but

an intelligence elevated by honor, purified by sympathy, stimulated by a sense of duty to the community."

Strangely enough, Lord Bryce, whose face has ever been turned toward the dayspring, for a moment seems almost to lose hope, when he estimates that the prospect of further progress toward the higher standards which the prophets of Democracy have deemed possible seems less promising now than at any time for a hundred years before the Great War. Presumptuous though it may appear to differ from his judgment, it seems to me that precisely the reverse is true. One of the supreme lessons of the Great War, if not the one supreme lesson, was the necessity, for the welfare of the race, of precisely that human progress which makes for the extension and the confirmation of Democracy. For in the last analysis it was a war of Autocracy against Democracy, in which Democracy won. And as Lord Bryce well says, any free people that has responded to the call of duty and come out of a terrible ordeal unshaken in courage, undimmed in vision, with its vital force still fresh and strong, need not fear to face the future.

That is precisely what has happened to modern democracies in and through and because of the Great War, and for that reason they are to-day facing the future with a more confident expectation of attaining higher standards than they had known in a hundred years before. Our modern democracies are but an integral part and parcel of the age-long and world-old democracies; modern only as the human race is modern, as civilization is modern, as religion is modern, as learning and the arts are modern. They have been developed as these have been developed, and they will endure as these endure. To doubt Democracy is to doubt humanity, and to doubt humanity is to doubt the integrity of the universe and the wisdom and benevolence of its Creator.

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